

TIBETAN MARMOT HUNTING

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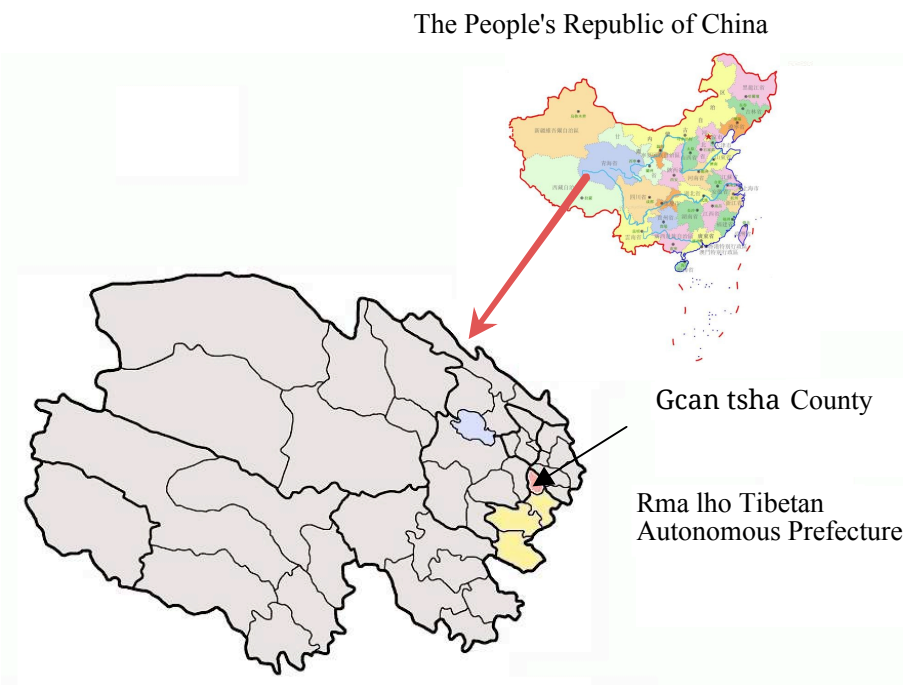
ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the hunting, cooking, and eating of marmots among pastoralists in Gcan tsha thang (Jianzhatan) Township, Gcan tsha (Jianzha) County, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. Folklore positing a connection between humans and marmots is discussed and Sangs rgyas bkra shis provides a story about local marmot hunters and gives accounts from his paternal grandmother (Pa lo skyid, b. 1941) about marmot hunting in 1958. A conclusion suggests directions for future research. Accounts of marmot hunting and marmot product use from Yul shul (Yushu) and Dkar mdzes (Ganzi) Tibetan autonomous prefectures, a map of Mtsho sngon, and six photographs provide further detail.

KEYWORDS

A mdo, Gcan tsha (Jianzha) County, hunting, marmots

MAP OF MTSO SNGON (QINGHAI) PROVINCE¹



¹China map: <https://tinyurl.com/yclut9ul>. Mtsho sngon map: <http://tinyurl.com/o6azwco>.

¹ཇག་པས་མི་ཟ་ཟས་གསུམ་དེ།

²སྟོང་གྱི་ཤུ་བོའི་གཞུག་རྟོག་གཅིག།

³གཉན་པོ་འབྱི་བའི་ཅི་ལམ་གཉིས།

⁴ནངས་སྤྱི་མོའི་ར་ཤ་འབྱུག་པ་གསུམ།

¹jag pas mi za zas gsum de

²stod kyi shwa bo'i gzhug rdog gcig

³gnyan po 'phyi ba'i tsi lam gnyis

⁴nangs snga mo'i ra sha 'khyag pa gsum

¹There are three foods bandits won't eat:

²The first is highland buck testes,

³The second is kindred marmots' bare armpits,

⁴The third is early morning cold goat meat.²

INTRODUCTION³

"Have you ever eaten marmot?" If Tibetans I⁴ know are asked this question, the answer is generally negative. However, upon further inquiry, the answer often develops to include accounts of having eaten marmot during times of critical food shortage and reference is often made to 'other' Tibetans 'over there' who do eat marmot. As Childs notes "...we should never assume that statements reflecting acceptable standards of behavior are an infallible guide to how people think and act under concrete circumstances" (2005:2). With regards to marmot as a food, it is of note that the excerpt from a wedding song above (from Khri ka [Guide] County) does not rule out eating marmot – just the marmot armpit.

In this paper, we provide information about the habitat and biology of the Himalayan Marmot; a description of Gcan tsha thang

² Tshe dbang rdo rje et al. (2010:128-129).

³ We thank George Schaller, Richard Harris, Andrew Smith, Gabriela Samcewicz, Timothy Thurston, Gerald Roche, and Rin chen rdo rje for helpful comments.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, 'I' and other first person references indicate Sangs rgyas bkra shis.

(Jianzhatan) Township; my family's experiences with herding and livestock; cooking and eating marmots, including related taboos; an account of marmot hunting given by my maternal grandmother (Pa lo skyid, b. 1941); and a story I wrote about hunting, cooking, and eating marmots based largely on personal experiences. Additional Tibetan areas are referenced in order to provide further information.

Nikol'skii and Ulak (2006:50-51), citing various sources, describe the Himalayan Marmot (*Marmota himalayana*, Hodgson [1841]) as a high-mountain species differing from other marmots in that it is only found at 3,000 meters and above, in mountains including the Kunlun, Arkatag, Altyn Tagh, and Nanshan mountain ranges, and on the Tibetan Plateau,⁵ in Sikkim, and in Bhutan. Smith and Yan (2008:191) provide additional information:

Himalayan Marmots live in small or large colonies, depending on local resources, and feed on grasses by preference, although they also consume roots, leaves of herbaceous plants, and seeds. They excavate unusually deep burrows, which are shared by colony members during hibernation.⁶ Females give birth toward the end of hibernation, with litter size reported to be 2-11...born from April to July. Gestation is one month, and young are generally weaned at 15 days of age. Young normally remain with the family, and females become reproductively active only in their second spring.

In terms of dangers to the environment, neither marmots nor pikas (*Ochotona curzoniae*) are seen by locals as a threat to the grassland. There are few pikas and locals do not feel that they damage the grassland. In summer, we often see and hear marmots, and we also know that they eat grass, however, they are not seen as a problem. This belief is not universally accepted in ecological literature, for example, it runs contrary to the viewpoint espoused by Long et al. (2009:189):

⁵ One of China's natural plague reservoirs (Benedict 1996).

⁶ See Chos bstan rgyal (2014:153) for an account of an agreement between Marmot and Rabbit that explains marmots' hibernation period.

The Himalayan marmot...increased rapidly in the areas where rangeland condition declined, which, in turn, led to degraded lands and, in severe cases, to secondary bare land.

In an interview with a representative of the Kansas City Public Library, Kenneth Armitage, an expert on the yellow-bellied marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*) (Armitage 2014), discussed how climate change was affecting marmots and concluded that warmer weather was largely responsible for an increase in the marmot population.⁷ However, this increase in population, despite warmer temperatures (Zhu et al. 2013) has not been reported on the Tibetan Plateau. For example, Harris and Loggers (2004) reported that the number of marmots in Yeniugou, Haixi Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Qinghai Province appeared unchanged since the 1990s. In general, however, little is known about climate change and its effects on *Marmota himalayana*.

GCAN TSHA THANG TOWNSHIP

Gcan tsha thang (Jianzhatan) Township, Gcan tsha (Jianzha) County, Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China consists of seven *sde ba* 'pastoral communities': G.yon ru (Xiayangzhi), Sprel nag⁸ (Shinaihai), Gle gzhug (Laiyu), Rkang mo (Gangmao), Lo ba (Luowa), Ka rgya dang bo (Gajiayi), and Ka rgya gnyis pa (Gajiaer).⁹

Gcan tsha thang Township has a land area of 642 square kilometers. The population of 4,000 is ninety-nine percent Tibetan,

⁷ Interview: KU's Marmot Man, Dr. Kenneth Armitage, <http://www.kclibrary.org/blog/kc-unbound/interview-ku-s-marmot-man-dr-kenneth-armitage>, accessed 18 April 2014.

⁸ For an introduction to this community in the context of Tibetan speeches, see Thurston (2012).

⁹ Data for elevation, population, and pastoral communities are from <http://wapbaike.baidu.com/view/928121.htm> and <http://wapbaike.baidu.com/view/1620614.htm> (accessed 3 March 2014).

according to official statistics.¹⁰ The township offices are located in Jianzhatan, the township seat. In 2014 this small settlement consisted of one main road; several small shops that sold clothes, snacks, and candy; the township government offices; and Bca 'sdod (Jisu) Primary School that had three grades, about 200 students (mostly from G.yon ru Pastoral Community), and ten teachers. Nearly all the Tibetans in this township are herders.

MARMOTS: TERMS, PRODUCTS AND THEIR USE, AND HUNTING

Locals use *'phyi ba* as a general term for 'marmot'. Young marmots are called *ca lu*. In Lo ba Pastoral Community, only a few male residents occasionally (once or twice a year) eat older marmots, while local females never eat marmots. Marmot meat is always cooked and eaten outside the house. It is never brought inside the house. The times I saw marmots cooked were when I was herding on the mountains near where the marmots were killed, and also near some homes. The only explanation I know for why marmots are not cooked inside the home is that locals believe it will anger the family's *srung ma* 'guardian deity' and, in retaliation, people and livestock will become ill. Any knife used to cut up marmot meat is not brought inside the home for the same reason. I am unable to explain why it is taboo for females to eat marmot.

Marmot fat is considered an efficacious treatment for the sores on livestock feet and mouths, for example, when they exhibit symptoms of foot and mouth disease.¹¹ Some families put the fat in a container, close the container, and hang it from the ceiling of their sheep shed to keep it handy for the treatment of livestock disease.

Marmot skin is also used to treat human ailments. Strips of marmot skins are tied around a person's back (hair side against the

¹⁰ A small number of non-Tibetan teachers, township government workers, and so on constitute the remaining one percent.

¹¹ Animals may have this disease once every two or three years. Locals use no treatment other than marmot fat.

skin) to treat back pain. I have seen a few old people wear such skins.

What I have observed above is in partial agreement with Bkra shis rab brten¹² from 'Bri stod County, Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon Province who, in consultation with local elders in 'Bri stod, supplied the following information:

Many people in the 'Bri stod (Zhiduo) area used to eat marmot, and a few people still do. During the times of starvation in the 1960s, people hunted marmots using hunting dogs and traps. Generally, people don't like to eat marmot because of its strong smell and because marmots have both upper and lower teeth, which some Tibetans believe make it a taboo food. Although the meat smells bad, certain people like the taste and eat marmot today, though they are no longer worried about having enough food to eat.

Most Tibetans in 'Bri stod don't eat marmots and they don't like those who do eat marmot to touch food containers or foods when they visit their homes. Brag dkar (Zhahe) Township residents are known for their marmot hunting.

Those who do eat marmots, usually cook marmots outside the house because of its strong smell and because some members of their family who don't eat marmot object to it being cooked inside. However, some families boil it inside their home. Because of the meat's strong and distinctive taste, only salt is used as a seasoning. Both women and men eat it.

Marmot fat is used to treat wounds in the belief it accelerates healing. Marmot skin is very helpful for arthritis, and pieces of skin are used to cover painful joints, and also to make shirts and trousers. Such clothes are worn with the hair side next to the skin, which is believed to lessen joint pain.

Grandmother (Pa lo skyid, b. 1941) told me that locals used to teach their hunting dogs, the same kind of dogs people keep today, to hunt marmots.¹³ Grandmother also provided the following account

¹² E-mail 14-16 April 2014.

¹³ For marmot-hunting dogs in Yul shul, see Bkra shis dpal 'bar (2011:295):

A group of low-status men traditionally hunted marmots. The belongings of these wandering men were carried by dogs. Such families also had dogs especially adept at hunting marmots, called 'marmot dogs'. These dogs were not considered special, because it is thought

about a government organized marmot hunt:

In the cold winter of 1958, the leaders forced us to make a marmot hunting team. I was part of that team. The earth was frozen and as hard as iron. We couldn't dig easily with metal shovels so we made a big fire atop a marmot den. The next morning, the earth was soft and we could easily dig. The earth was not frozen several meters under the surface. We dug a long tunnel and then we went into the hole one by one and pushed the soil out using our hands. When we reached the head of the hole, there was a large den that about nine people could sit in. There were also nine marmots leaning against the wall. Their hands were together as though they were meditating. They were very fat, just like marmots in autumn. There was grass in the den, just like the grass in summer. There was so much grass that it took two yaks to haul it back to where we were living.¹⁴ We took the marmots outside and they collapsed when the sun shone on them.

Later, the men killed the marmots and gave them to the officers in the community [who probably ate them].

Some Lha sa people¹⁵ use the term *sgom pa rgya ris* 'piebald meditator'.¹⁶ People say marmots meditate in winter and that is why they don't die, even though they stay in their dens all winter.

that almost any dog can hunt marmots. Furthermore, these dogs were considered ugly because they were mottled-the back of the neck was spotted and the tail was white. Such dogs were thought to be slow and clumsy. Currently, local people disparage certain dogs by calling them 'marmot dogs'.

¹⁴ In a survey of local people's attitudes toward wildlife conservation in Hemis National Park, Ladakh, researchers reported locals found "that marmots tended to consume much needed livestock forage in the form of non-cultivated grasses and forbs" (Jackson et al. 2003:8). This accords with Pa lo skyid's observation of the relatively large quantity of forage the marmots had collected.

¹⁵ 'Lha sa people' is a term used by locals to refer to people from Central Tibet.

¹⁶ *Sgom pa rgya ris* 'piebald/ dappled meditator'. *Rgya ris* refers, locally, to a color, not only for a marmot's face, but more generally to describe the color of yaks, i.e., a yak that has a black body but a head that is of a different, mixed color, e.g., black, yellow, and white hair all together. The term is also used to describe a sheep that is all white except for a face of the colors just described. The same notion applies to a marmot's face.

Many years ago, when people were walking to Lha sa from A mdo, Lha sa people asked A mdo people if it was true that people ate marmots in A mdo. If the A mdo people said yes, the Lha sa people were shocked and immediately prayed to Buddha, hoping that they wouldn't be reborn in such a place.

Grandmother also told me the following about one of her relatives who is about her age:

In that difficult time, he was very good at catching marmots. When he skinned and butchered marmots, hungry children would surround him and would try to grab and eat pieces of the raw marmot.

When I was a child, I heard elders scold young people if they saw them kill marmots. Father's brother (Rdo rje thar, b. 1977) said that he thought killing marmots was terrible. When I asked why, he said:

Marmots and people are relatives. They each took an oath that they would never hurt each other. To seal this oath, the marmots gave people a piece of their flesh and the people gave the marmots a piece of their flesh. That piece of flesh is the armpit. Today people are crazy and have broken this oath. It is a serious sin. Human beings are not to be trusted.¹⁷

He was distraught. Later, wondering if this was true, I asked Grandmother. She said it was true, although she added that she had never looked in a marmot's armpit.

A complementary report comes from travelers in Mgo log. While circumambulating the sacred mountain, A myes rma chen, their driver, Nanjit [Rnam rgyal] made the following comment:

...Tibetans do not eat the marmots because they share a special

¹⁷ This coincides with Tshe dbang rdo rje et al. (2010:128):

Local accounts tell that marmots and people are relatives because they long ago exchanged their armpits with each other. Proof of this is that people have hairy armpits and marmots do not.

connection with the animal. According to him [Nanjit/ Rnam rgyal], the marmot has no hair under its armpits. The reason is because it gave that part of its body to us, which is why we have hair under our armpits. And we, in turn, gave our hairless armpits to them. Therefore, we both share each other's body, which is why we should refrain from eating marmots lest we want to partake in some [sic] cannibalism.¹⁸

Notions of kinship between humans and marmots is one likely reason marmot hunters are generally denigrated. Old people scold young people if they see them killing marmots.

One autumn in about 2005, five Han Chinese men came to my home in a trailer pulled by a tractor and pitched two cloth tents. They killed, skinned, cooked, and ate marmots. They were particularly interested in the marmot skins. They also poisoned marmots. Some livestock ate the poison and died. Eventually, we made the marmot hunters leave.¹⁹

I heard that residents in one community in Khri ka (Guide) County kill few sheep. Instead, they hunt marmots for meat, and both men and women eat marmot meat. I do not know how true this is, however, my home area borders this village and, while herding, I have seen residents of that community trying to catch marmots.

There is variation in hunting, eating, and utilization of marmots and marmot products. For example, Dze lu (b. 1950) from Brag mda' (Zhang da) Village, Nyin mo (Yimu) Township, Brag 'go (Luhuo) County, Dkar mdzes (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province provided this account:

I hunted marmots when I was about twenty years old. There were stories that eating marmot and even seeing a marmot would prevent good luck, but people hunted them quite often, mostly for their skin. While people did cook marmot in their homes and

¹⁸ <http://www.chinanomads.com/a-half-kora-around-amnye-machen>, (accessed 7 March 2014). Nanjit = Rnam rgyal, a native of Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon.

¹⁹ Soonam Doomtso (2011) offers a chapter on Chinese marmot hunters in her home area in Sichuan Province, the concern they created in the local community, and what was done to persuade the marmot hunters to leave.

both men and women ate it, the skin was what was prized. It was especially good for kidney pain²⁰ that a lot of local men seemed to suffer from. Marmot skin was also the best kind of bed covering. Nothing seemed to stain it, including baby pee.²¹

In 2003, when I was about twelve years old, while helping Grandmother herd sheep near some broken walls about a fifteen-minute walk from our home, I asked her, "Who lived here?"

She said, "I heard some families lived here but they then got '*phyi nad* 'marmot disease' [the plague]. Many people died from that disease, so they were afraid of living here and fled."

This resonates with Fang's (2009) report:

A deadly-infectious zoonotic disease caused by the *Bacillus yersini pestis*, plague is listed as the No. 1 Infectious Disease of Class A in the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases." Qinghai is one of the provinces that have suffered the most severe plagues in the country, as evidenced by the once-popular saying that "China will be free from plagues if Qinghai is safe from it" before the 1980's. The major host animal of *Bacillus yersini pestis* [sic] is the Himalayan marmot. ... statistics demonstrate that in 1949–1992 the number of pneumonic plague patients in Qinghai accounted for 57.37% of the total number of China, which was much higher than that in other provinces.²²

These concerns about the plague infecting humans through contact with marmots are also borne out by what I have observed. If a

²⁰ This corresponds with what Sun et al. (1989:85) reported, i.e., that the marmot's "flesh is used as a traditional medicine for renal disease."

²¹ We thank Lhun 'grub for this account, received in May 2014.

²² This quote is from <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/cspub/dcp/2009/00000001/00000001/art00007>, accessed 8 April 2014. We did not have access to other versions of this article. See also <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/872095.shtml> (accessed 6 August 2014), for an account of a resident of Yumen City, Gansu Province who died:

of bubonic plague. ... The 38-year-old victim was said to have approached a dead marmot, a small furry animal which lives on grasslands and is related to the squirrel. The victim allegedly chopped it up to feed his dog but developed a fever the same day.

marmot, for example, has bald spots, moves slowly, and has dull hair, it is considered to be sick and is avoided. Dead marmots are also avoided. Locals believe that close contact with a sick or dead marmot might also make them sick, which is supported by a study done by Li et al. (2005) involving serum samples collected in Huangyuan County, Xining City, Mtsho sngon Province from marmot hunters and their family members. The results of this study suggest that marmot hunting brings significant risk in terms of plague infection that may enter a human host through small skin breaks, infected fleas, and through respiration. The authors note that because sick marmots are easier for hunters to catch, they pose a greater risk for plague infection.

In my pastoral community of around 4,000, there might be about ten people who hunt and eat marmots. No one in my family hunts marmots. However, if a neighbor or friend is cooking a marmot, they feel obligated to offer the meat to whoever might be nearby. In such a case, my father or brother might eat a piece of marmot, also out of a sense of obligation.

Marmot skins are rarely sold by locals.

With the above as background, I provide a short, fictional account of marmot hunting, based on my experiences herding my family's livestock.

MARMOT HUNTING

Early one morning, Tshe 'bum yag and Mgon po, both in their mid-twenties, drove their flocks of sheep and herds of yaks to the mountains as usual. After leaving their livestock in a valley with plenty of grass and flowers, with shovels on their shoulders they climbed a mountain. The bright sun shone in the cloudless blue sky. Countless sunrays reflected off billions of dewdrops on the grass. Tshe 'bum yag and Mgon po reached the mountain top, collected some stones, put them in their robe pouch, and looked around. Everything was quiet.

Tshe 'bum yag cupped his hands and whispered into Mgon po's left ear, "Let's look in that valley."

The two men crept slowly and carefully, not making a

sound, into a valley, looked around, and saw three fat marmots grazing joyfully about fifteen meters away. The three marmots repeatedly put their ears up, and listened quietly again and again. However, they didn't register the arrival of the two hunters and continued grazing.

The two hunters were very familiar with marmot behavior and didn't move. First, they looked around for the marmot family's den. A moment later, Mgon po gestured to Tshe 'bum yag, pointing to a hole in the ground with his forefinger. Tshe 'bum yag looked in that direction and saw an opening near the three marmots. The hunters guessed it was the marmots' burrow. At this time, the biggest marmot was about thirty meters from the hole. The two hunters estimated that they could reach the hole before the marmots.

"Ke! Ke! Ke!" the two hunters suddenly shouted, threw stones at the marmots, and ran toward the hole.

The three frightened marmots tried to escape into their burrow. Two reached their burrow, despite being struck by stones, and disappeared inside. Tshe 'bum yag stood at the hole blocking the big marmot. He forcefully threw a stone at it, striking it in the belly. Realizing it was impossible to reach its burrow the marmot ran, looking for another hole.

The two hunters ran after the marmot, shouted, threw stones, and tried to catch it. The marmot ran down into the valley and disappeared into a burrow just as Tshe 'bum yag had nearly grabbed its back legs. Somewhat disappointed, they examined the hole, which was surrounded by bushes.

Holes that marmots frequently use are dug into soft earth that does not contain large stones. When marmots dig tunnels and encounter rocks, they may abandon the tunnel. Furthermore, bushes are generally very low around the opening to a marmot den because the marmots eat them. The soil inside the hole was hard and white, which told the two hunters it was an abandoned den that was probably shallow.

They took off their robes and began digging. The summer earth was soft and easy to dig. Mgon po concentrated on looking for the marmot inside the hole.

After Tshe 'bum yag had dug about two meters, Mgon po shouted, "I can see it!"

The marmot was furiously digging. The hole was very narrow and the marmot couldn't turn back. Mgon po pulled its tail, which broke off. The big marmot was very strong and Mgon po couldn't pull it out. Then Tshe 'bum yag took his sash, tied it

tightly around the marmot's legs, and dragged it out of the hole. Mgon po hit its head with the shovel. The marmot staggered here and there making loud sounds of suffering. Finally, Tshe 'bum yag took the shovel and hit the marmot's head really hard. Its head shook as blood poured from its nose, and its legs jerked spasmodically. It died a moment later.

The two hunters carried the big marmot up the valley. "We are lucky today. We killed this one easily," they exulted while chatting on the way.

Their sheep and yaks were scattered everywhere when Tshe 'bum yag and Mgon po reached the mountain top. Other flocks of sheep and herds of yaks were there, too.

"Ke! A! Ha! Ha!" shouted Mgon po and holding one of the marmot's legs, swung the dead marmot above his head when he saw some fellow herdsmen.

They gathered at the top of a small hill where they could watch everybody's livestock. Tshe 'bum yag, being the oldest, directed his fellows to collect stones and dried yak dung.

"Please find about fifteen round stones. This marmot is really big," Tshe 'bum yag said to two fellows, who went to find the stones.

Tshe 'bum yag thrust a long-handled shovel into the earth. Then he walked over to a yak and pulled out some hair from its tail as it grazed. He returned to the shovel. The blade was firmly in the ground. He made a long tight string from the yak hair, tied the string around the marmot's two long front teeth, and then tied the string around the upper part of the shovel handle. The marmot's body now hung down, the head firmly tied to the shovel handle. He took his dagger from his belt, cut around the marmot's throat, skillfully tore flesh away from the bones inside the marmot's body, and cut and broke the bones at the joints. He discarded the intestines. He then cut away the lower part of the front legs and also cut off the head and discarded it.

Mgon po and others made a fire from the collected yak dung and put the round stones into the fire. The stones were soon red hot. Tshe 'bum yag pulled open the opening of the marmot carcass. Mgon po held a marmot leg that had been cut off, pulled a leg tendon to make the claw grip a hot stone tightly, and, in this way, put stones into the meat-filled skin. They also added cut-up bones, salt, liquor, and *ri sgog* 'wild garlic' they had collected in the valley. The liquor and onions removed the marmot meat's unpleasant odor. Tshe 'bum yag tied the skin tightly at the neck with yak hair string.

The broth soon began boiling inside the skin. A moment

later, they brought some black soil dug from the earth by a *byi long* 'mole', put it on the skin, and pulled out the hair from the skin with their fingers. The black soil made removing the hair easy.

The marmot skin soon became as yellow as fried chicken. The herders salivated when they saw this. Some minutes later, they collected fresh grass and put the cooked marmot on top of the grass. They untied the string and poured broth into the bowls they had brought from home. They were careful that the very hot broth did not burn their mouths. Tshe 'bum yag cut the marmot meat into pieces, removed the stones, and then they started eating. While the livestock enjoyed the grass and flowers, the herders enjoyed the delicious marmot meat. This merry summer day was pleasant for both livestock and herdsman.

After eating, they divided the leftovers equally. Each would take his portion home to share with his family members. A local saying goes:

*gal te 'phyi sha zos ba'i rjes nas pho ba na tshe bcos
thabs dka' la/de zhi ba'i sman ni chu 'khyag yin*

If your stomach aches after you eat marmot, it is difficult to cure. Cold water is the best medicine.

Following this injunction, they all went into a valley, found a clean stream, and drank as much clean, cold water as they could from the head of the stream that flowed out from the earth.

In the afternoon, as the sun's weakening rays shone in the distant horizon, Tshe 'bum yag and others gathered their livestock, counted them to make sure they were all there, and then drove them home while singing loudly.

CONCLUSION

When I was a child, my parents told me and my two brothers, as well as any other children who happened to be near, "Don't kill baby rabbits. If you do, their mother will come and hurt your mother." They also scolded us if they saw us killing insects, saying, "If you kill insects, their mother will come and go through your mother's ear and

your mother will die." When we found sparrow nests with eggs, we often inspected the eggs to see if they had hatched. Our parents then warned, "If you often look at the nests, hawks will know where the nest is and kill the sparrow family."

Although my father slaughters some of our livestock every year,²³ it is to provide us with meat, a main part of our diet as herdsmen. The prohibition against killing marmots is particularly strong, given the belief that marmots are related to humans.

The photographs below, which were taken on 13 August 2014 about a ten minute walk from my family's tent in our autumn pasture, relate to this. A Han man from Khri ka County, who had come to the local area before to buy sheep and yaks, and to sell flour and red bricks, had brought three metal traps and put them in different marmot dens at around noon. He checked the traps in the afternoon, found three marmots had been caught, and killed them with a knife. Knowing that locals would scold him if they saw him with dead marmots, he put the marmot carcasses in a bag, put the bag in a marmot den, and covered this with a stone to ensure dogs would not find it. Then he put the traps in new dens.

That night, the hunter stayed in a tent with a local family that treated him well and offered him mutton and noodles. The next morning, some locals saw him killing marmots that were in his traps. They chanted for the marmots, scolded the hunter, and told him to take the dead animals with him and never hunt marmots again. Father phoned me when he saw this because I had told him that I needed some marmot pictures. When I got there by motorcycle, the hunter was leaving.

"How did you learn to trap marmots and what will you do with them?" I asked the hunter.

He said, "I used to herd yaks on the Laji Mountains²⁴ about ten years ago when my family lived there. I often hunted with my hunting dog. It is easy to catch marmots if you have a hunting dog. I

²³ In 2013, it was about five sheep. In some years Father might also slaughter a yak.

²⁴ Located about fifty kilometers southeast of the center of Xining City.

also hunted foxes, because Tibetans liked to wear fox skin hats at that time. My family members like to eat marmot. I'll take them home and eat them with my family."

As the fictional hunting account above and the photographs that follow indicate, some local Tibetans do hunt, kill, and eat marmots, but it is not something they boast about.

Future research on marmots might address such questions as:

- What are local attitudes toward marmots and how do such attitudes influence interactions between humans and marmots?
- Why do certain Tibetan villages hunt marmots while others do not?
- What is the attitude toward marmot hunting on the part of Mongols who live in Tibetan contexts?
- What is the relationship between marmot hunting and traditional concepts of purity and pollution?
- What is the market for marmot products and how does this impact marmot populations?

PHOTOGRAPHS

Figure 1. Marmot den near my home (January 2014). Local elders scold people they see digging into marmot dens because they think killing marmots is wrong and that such digging damages the grassland.



Figure 2. Marmot den in my family's fenced pasture (August 2014).



Figure 3. Tibetans from a neighboring community in Khri ka County dug into this marmot den (January 2014).



Figure 4. Marmot trapped and killed by a Han man from Khri ka County in the autumn pasture (August 2013, Rab brtan rgyal).



Figure 5. Marmots trapped and killed by a Han man from Khri ka County in the autumn pasture (August 2013, Rab brtan rgyal).



Figure 6. Marmot fat in a Pepsi bottle in my neighbor's sheep enclosure.



Figure 7. Himalayan marmots in Ladakh (Webster 2013).²⁵



²⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Himalayan_Marmots.jpg, accessed 26 August 2014. This is an edited version of the file that is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'Bri stod འབྲི་སྟོད། (Zhiduo 治多)

A mdo ཨ་མདོ།

A myes rma chen ཨ་མྱེ་མ་ཆེན།

Bca' sdod བཅའ་སྟོད། (Jisu 寄宿)

Bkra shis dpal 'bar བརྒྱ་ཤིས་དཔལ་འབར།

Bkra shis rab brtan བརྒྱ་ཤིས་རབ་བརྟན།

Brag 'go བླག་འགོ། (Luhuo 炉霍) County

Brag dkar བླག་དཀར། (Zhahe 扎河)

Brag mda' བླག་མདའ། (Zhangda 章达)

byi long བྱི་ལོང།

ca lu ཅ་ལུ།

Chos bstan rgyal ཆོས་བསྟན་རྒྱལ།

Dkar mdzes དཀར་མཛེས། (Ganzi 甘孜)

Dze lu རྩེ་ལུ།

G.yon ru གཡོན་རུ། (Xiayangzhi 辖羊直)

Gansu 甘肃 Province

Gcan tsha thang གཅན་ཅཱ་ཐང། (Jianzhatan 尖扎滩) Township

Gcan tsha གཅན་ཅཱ། (Jianzha 尖扎) County

Gle gzhus གླེ་གཞུག། (Laiyu 来玉)

gal te 'phyi sha zos ba'i rjes nas pho ba na tshe bcos thabs dka' la/de

zhi ba'i sman ni chu 'khyag yin གཤམ་ཏེ་བྱི་ཤེ་ཤེས་བའི་རྩེས་ནས་ཕོ་བ་ན་ཆོ་

བཅོས་ཐབས་དཀར་ལ། དེ་ཞི་བའི་སྒྲན་ནི་ཆུ་འབྲུག་ཡིན།

Haxi 海西 Mongolian and Tibetan Prefecture

Huangyuan 湟源 County

Ka rgya dang bo ཀ་རྒྱ་དང་བོ། (Gajiayi 尕加一)

Ka rgya knyis pa ཀ་རྒྱ་གཉིས་པ། (Gajiaer 尕加二)

Khri ka ཁྲི་ཀ། (Guide 贵德)

Laji 拉脊 Mountains

Lha sa ལ་ས་

Lhun 'grub ལུན་གུབ་

Lo ba ལོ་བ་ (Luowa) 洛哇

Mgo log མགོ་ལོག་

Mgon po མགོན་པོ་

Mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན་ (Qinghai 青海) Province

Nyin mo ཉིན་མོ་ (Yimu 宜木) Township

Pa lo skyid པ་ལོ་སྐྱིད་

pastoral community (*mu wei hui* 牧委会)

'phyi ba འཕྱི་བ་

'phyi nad འཕྱི་ནད་

Rab brtan rgyal རབ་བརྟན་རྒྱལ་

Rdo rje thar རོ་རྗེ་ཐར་

Re bltos bca' sdod རེ་བཟོས་བཅའ་སྡོད་ (Fuheji xiao 福和寄校)

Rin chen rdo rje རིན་ཆེན་རོ་རྗེ་

ri sgog རི་སྒོག་

Rkang mo ཀང་མོ་ (Gangmao 刚毛)

Rma lho མ་ལྷོ་ (Huangnan 黄南) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

Rnam rgyal རྣམ་རྒྱལ་

Sangs rgyas bkra shis སངས་རྒྱས་བཀྲ་ཤིས་

sde ba སྡེ་བ་ pastoral community, village

sgom pa rgya ris སྒོམ་པ་རྒྱ་རིས་

Shaanxi Normal University, Shaanxi shi fan daxue 陕西师范大学

Sichuan 四川 Province

Sonam Doomtso (Bsod nams dung mtsho བསོད་ནམས་དུང་མཚོ་)

Sprel nag སྤེལ་ནག་ (Shinaihai 石乃亥)

Srung ma སྤུང་མ་

Tshe 'bum yag ཚེ་བུམ་ཡག་

Tshe dbang rdo rje ཚེ་དབང་རྡོ་རྗེ།

Yeniugou 野牛沟

Yul shul ཡུལ་ཤུལ། (Yushu 玉树)

Yumen 玉门 City

Xining 西宁 City